

Back Again, Back Again: Leander

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode nineteen: Leander.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine beings to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

I had claimed the sunset-to-starlight watch on the southeastern side of camp. I couldn't get the timing right, listeners, trying to figure out when midnight here would be based off of the time of day I'd woken up in Rhysea. I'd thought the family I'd stumbled into the lives of were eating breakfast - but who could be sure? I'd lost so much of that day and all perception of time after I'd pulled my sword from the tree. Was it midnight for me, morning for them? Would my doom then be the soft morning of the twenty-fourth here or dead-of-night, sharp snap to a new day, like it had been at home?

(When the end did come, dear listener, it was that soft dawn. I even thought I'd gotten away with it - another year of home. A chance to see everything we'd worked towards come true. But I'd done what this world had sent me for.)

(I wish I could say I was even tricked back through the wardrobe. I wasn't. We both know how I woke up back in my world. We both know the way back from Rhysea. It's not just birthdays. It's - dying.)

(But - there are still years and years to go until then. We should carry on.)

I took the sunset watch and passed through the dead-of-night so anxious my arms went numb, all pins and needles and raw sick emotion. I allowed myself one gasping second of relief when Iolo came to relieve me to take over for the dead-of-night-to-dawn shift until I realized that I couldn't walk away, not when it felt as if my internal clock were counting down to doomsday - not when there was still the possibility of that dawn ending. Iolo rolled her eyes and pressed the blanket she'd brought with to wrap around her shoulders into my arms - the nights were getting colder again, we could all feel it, even though the days still teased warmth and sun. *I'm not staying up if you are*, she grumbled, and tugged at my hair. *Silly girl. You'll wear yourself out. I'll enjoy the rest that you will not.*

She disappeared back into the maze of tents, pausing and glancing over her shoulder for a second, two. Then Iolo, too, was gone.

Till dawn. Till dawn. If it was my last few hours in Rhysea, I would not waste them on sleep. I would sleep when I was dead. I would sleep when I was back - the two were much the same thing.

I was restless, pacing my side of camp, when I realized I was no longer alone. Leander ducked out of the shadows, hesitating like a deer before a highway as they caught my eye. They buttoned and unbuttoned the last button on their still-stained-vest, the rest of it gaping open.

Hey, they said, and stepped closer. Their fingertips were covered in ink - maybe from helping out Nat, maybe from staying up late writing down whatever was catching and catching at their mind.

Hey, I responded. *I thought I was the only one supposed to be up.*

They ducked their head, just a bit, something tugging at the corners of their mouth, and it did not escape my notice. Their eyes flashed, and shimmered, a strange sort of gold. Like Callia's, always. Like mine, when I was doing magic. Something was worrying them. *I couldn't sleep, either.* They paused, and looked at me, and I knew they knew I saw. *Ilyaas. Tonight*

something begins. It won't come to me, yet, the extent of it, but the world whispers. Someone comes. Someone ends.

I froze. *Ominous*, I said, in English, unaware of the Rhysean word, but they seemed to understand by my tone what I'd meant. *What do you mean by that? How do you know?*

They shrugged. *Sometimes stories come into my head. Fully realized songs. This song is not finished, but it is beginning to form. I am weaving webs.*

I bit at my cheek. *Should we - get Callia? Rhia?*

No, they said, too fast and too sharp. *Not yet. I don't know. Not yet. Sometimes the feeling fades. I don't - I don't know, Ilyaas. I can't sleep.*

Was this their magic - Prophecy? Bit of prophecy? We all had something. I didn't understand why they were so nervous about theirs.

I thought back over what they'd said, trying not to get caught up on *someone ends*. I didn't want *someone* to be me. I didn't want to *pop* out of existence before their eyes, the tugging at their gut this world's last favor to prove to Callia that I didn't run. That I was pulled away. I didn't want them to be witness to my leaving, because I didn't - want - to leave. *Should I worry?* I asked. *Someone ends?*

They cocked their head. *Do you believe you should be?*

I laughed a nervous, bubbling laugh. *It's - It's my birthday. I think.*

That was a non sequitur, but I didn't have the mind to fully realize what I was trying to say.

Leander seemed to understand that, came around to stand next to me - then, without hesitation, plunked themselves down onto the ground. They reached up to tug at my hand. *Many happy returns*, they said. *Sit. Please.*

I sat, haltingly lowering myself to the ground. My sword, sheathed and tucked through my belt, caught on the ground, then caught, then caught again until I had to pull the whole thing off. My hands were shaking. I couldn't get the buckle undone.

Nervous, Leander said, but it wasn't a question. It almost sounded like they already knew. *And what's the thing you're nervous for?*

I - I could neither start nor finish that sentence correctly. I couldn't come up with any words in Rhysean and I feared that a word in English would be enough to send me home. I found a phrase Rhia had taught me for one of the first festivals with the Kings I'd been to. *I am from Somewhere Else*. It was easier, then, after the first few words. *It has been a year. I fear that I will be sent back*. I stumbled out more, about doorways and midnights and dawns, and even when I was certain I was making no kind of sense, they listened.

Ah, Leander said, finally. They'd let the silence drag on after I'd finally closed my rambling mouth, just in case it fell back open with something I'd forgot. *That is quite a fear. Is it truly awful, this world of yours?*

No, I said, defensive and unsure of why. I reconsidered. *Yes. No. Sometimes, yes.*

They shrugged and settled in closer beside me. Leander laced their fingers through mine. *I cannot blame you. Even if it is glorious in yours, I would not want to leave Rhysea, too.*

I couldn't help it. *But you ran, I said. When I saw you at the festival, I told you what I thought we were. You and - the prince - and I. And you ran.*

Running is different than leaving, Leander said, shrugging, a bit of a grin tugging at their lips. There was something disarming about the way they said it - honesty, without hacking away at a *why*. *I ran. I did not leave Rhysea. I cannot leave Rhysea. Not now, or ever. And look what came of it.* Now they did laugh, fully. *I got caught. I had to be rescued. Silas died for me to end up in the same place as we could have, together, much earlier on.*

I watched their leg bounce, *taptaptaptap* of their heel against the dirt, and tried for a bit of honesty, uncurbed, in return. *If you hadn't run - if you'd stayed and joined Cassian and I - I don't think I would have had the guts to leave, I*

said. *I think I would still be beside him. You were the reason I finally did. You were the reason I finally realized what he is. What I was becoming.*

We are both stupid in strange ways, Leander said, and tapped the side of their head against mine. *We pick the wrong decision for ourselves and the right decision for the other.* I knew they meant Silas. I wanted to say, *we all knew the risks* and I wanted to say *it was Io that killed her, not you,* but I felt a little guilty about it too, too caught up in Cassian to have thought about it going wrong for the others. I also knew, even though I hadn't known her as well as I would have liked, that Silas would have thought it ridiculous for Leander to take on the burden of someone else's betrayal.

She would have hated that we are remembering her as a dead thing instead of as all she was in life, I said instead.

I've learned that, Leander whispered. Their foot was tapping even faster, *thumpthumpthumpthump* against the ground. *I didn't know a thing about her except how she looked the second before she fell. I'm trying to learn. I'm trying. I'm trying.*

Dear listeners - this is why Leander was always better than all the rest of us. I'd sat in my grief and my shame over the people I'd killed or helped to kill in this camp. I'd written speeches to give to the people they'd loved to try and make them forgive me. I'd tried to avoid any mention of them so people

wouldn't remember who I'd been - as if they could forget. As if they could have forgotten. Never had I thought to ask, and listen, and learn. Never had I thought to hold their memories with me.

I allowed myself to breathe without fearing the exhale and slid my head down onto their shoulder. They set their head against mine. *And she would have loved you for it*, I managed, my voice thick. *Everything that happened - everything that could have - I don't think there was any easy path to take. We were damned if we did. Damned if we didn't.*

We breathed in silence, both of us trying to calm our breathing. Finally, Leander said, *can I tell you a story? That I learned about her, when she was young?*

Please, I gasped. *I would love that. More than anything.*

We both know how this will end, they began, *but far before Silas gave her life for someone who still isn't sure how to make her sacrifice worth it, she ran away from home for a day with a basket of bread and a blanket to try and swim all the way to the Far Shore.*

It had obviously been one of her favorite memories. The way it was told didn't sound quite like Leander - some of the lilt disappeared, the iambs their words fit into more times than not. Silas had loved to talk and talk and talk (and I'd loved her for that). This must have been a story told to others so much they,

too, could recite it. This wasn't a stumbling first draft. This wasn't Leander trying to simultaneously remember what they'd been told and fit those words into a story. This was something they'd committed to memory the second they heard it. A bit of the life of the woman they'd lost, locked into their chest.

We lapsed back into silence. I smiled and scrubbed at the tear tracks on my face, trying to stop them before they landed on Leander.

You asked about my running, they said. I was nervous enough with my blood. I was not sure if I wanted to find you or run from you or find you and run from Cassian. You were the kings' pawn - I tried not to squirm at that - and they used your magic to prove they were right. I wasn't sure that I wanted to stand up there beside you in a golden cage as something to point to as reason for tyranny. I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if I believed in the stories I told that was not a path I could take.

See, I said. *You ran for all the reasons I should have.*

They laughed, a gentle huff. *I also ran because - because - their breathing faltered, words hitching at the end. When you grabbed my arm - I had a - I saw - something. People burning, people dead, people that I knew. People I did not know then and know I now. I saw a future with you and Callia - a glimpse of one - and I saw Silas, a knife through her back. Part of me ran*

because I realized I could not join the prince. The rest of me thought that if I left, I could have saved their lives.

Leander - I began.

I took it as a warning, they said. The vision. I should have seen it as a promise.

We were both stupid in strange ways, I murmured, tossing their words back to them. If nothing else - I'm glad that I met you. That all this led me to you.

As am I, in the end. Leander lifted their head and wrapped their arms around my shoulders, settling their chin in by my neck. As am I. They looked up to where the stars were just threatening to give way to the first gasping breaths of dawn. Stop worrying about your fate, girl-from-another-world. You have heard Callia. It's starting. My Rhysea will not let you go until it is over.

Until it's over. [Laughs] until it's over. We should have taken some of the things they said more seriously.

[FX: The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that you do not have to fill your days with action and creation to be worthy of the space you take up. You were made already whole.

The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.